

Shakespeare's Virtual Selves

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Abstract

With the expansion of IT, new media and growing trends in SNS addiction, it is evident that in a hyper-connected modern society, the notion of a fixed identity has been problematised by the multiplicity and diversity of identities one may assume in a virtual environment. However, to what avail? What motivates one to fabricate and replicate multitudes of synthetic identities? Ever-presence? Immortality? Moreover, is it only a recent phenomenon? By principally taking into account concepts from posthumanist discourse, I attempt to address these questions in this article by drawing parallels between Shakespeare's use of literature as a means of self-propagation and self-preservation and contemporary use of social media. By drawing examples from some of Shakespeare's key works, I will illustrate both how and why media which enable self-expression and self-projection, have enabled their users to challenge Essentialism and notions of a fixed identity and explore the murky, fluidity that is the posthumanist condition.

Keywords: *posthumanism, Shakespeare, virtual identities.*

Introduction

To be or...[insert post]. Prior to interpreting Hamlet's poignant yet infinitely cited and often clichéd line-turned-marketing slogan, it is, needless to say, necessary to establish what 'being' is in the age of peer-to-peer communication. For Shakespeare, if 'being,' in respect to its infinitive verb form 'to be' referred to human existence, and if one then regards human existence in a Cartesian or Essentialist light (viewing life as a linear narrative with a marked beginning and end), then how can particular narrative devices and discursive elements in Shakespeare's works which stretch beyond the boundaries of Essentialism be accounted for? Was the frequent questioning

of humanity, mortality or existence coincidental or was Shakespeare pre-emptive of the multiplicity and diversity of levels of existence? As a recent development of discourse and theory in inter-disciplinary fields, more notably in literature and cultural studies, notions of posthumanism or “the posthuman” condition have provided a platform not to construct, deconstruct, or forthright challenge humanism or humanist notions, but to reconsider them from diverse perspectives.

Considering the contemporary culture of human and technological symbiosis and given the futility in defining posthumanism or “the” posthuman, for the purpose of demonstrating elements of posthumanism in terms of virtuality and mediated levels of existence, José van Dijck’s notions of mediated memories—being “the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others” (2007 p.21)—aptly suffices as a starting point for further discussions. As well as van Dijck’s work, a Derridean poststructuralist theoretical approach (which embraces the polysemy of meaning) will be employed to analyse Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In doing so, I will attempt to locate traces of virtual identities within certain narrative devices employed in Shakespeare’s primary texts. Prior to the analyses of the primary texts, a literature review of the key theoretical concepts in respect to both posthumanism, virtuality and mediated activities, will be outlined to establish the direction of the analyses. Significant theorists and respective works include N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston’s *Posthuman Bodies* (1995), Jacques Derrida’s *Writing and Difference* (1967), Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene* (1976), John Law’s ‘Notes on the Theory of the Actor Network: Ordering, Strategy and Heterogeneity’ (1992), Pramod K. Nayar’s *Virtual Worlds: Culture and Politics in the World of Cyber Technology* (2004) and among more, Jean Baudrillard’s ‘The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media’ (1985). The forthcoming analyses will then consider Shakespeare’s appropriation of *mise en abyme*, the often recycled “messenger” persona, soliloquies, and epilogues as his potential means of self-pres-

ervation. The arguments corresponding to each method of narrative presentation, influenced by multi-disciplinary concepts and theories (relevant to the abovementioned narrative techniques), will be outlined in greater detail in these passages rather than in the literature review. If the future of humanity is the posthuman, and if one accepts presentism as a symptom of the posthuman condition, then the supposed timelessness of Shakespeare's work and his arguable fixation on immortality through the production of fiction holds significant validity when considering the multiplicity of being when suspended in time and space, with and within the interface.

Literature review

Prior to validating the pertinence of posthumanist discourse and theory to concepts of virtual selves identifiable both in Shakespeare's work and contemporary techno-culture, a succinct definition of virtual selves is necessary to put the discussion into perspective. In a broad sense, virtual selves are semi-unique multiplications or replications of an original identity which are neither one hundred per cent identical, nor one hundred per cent unique copies. These virtual selves can be generated through what I refer to as 'ME'diated performative acts. That is, the rather self-centered construction of various identities via the use of IT (especially social network services) or more traditionally, via methods of narrative presentation in literature.

To simplify with a scenario, take for instance Identity X, who uses a Human Interface Device (HID) like a smartphone to post messages or create a personal blog. While this data is not a complete copy of the original identity (Identity X), it serves as a new virtual self (or version of Identity X) through the 'ME'diated performance. The virtual self then co-exists with Identity X, but it differs in that it is essentially immortal in its data form. In contrast, and perhaps more relevant to the discussion, Shakespeare—who used a medium (a stage) to indirectly project himself through his work—simultaneously utilized narrative devices (such as *mise en abyme*), whereby his characters could further create intra-narrative virtual versions of themselves in Act III, Scene II. For instance, in Hamlet's staging of a play to pro-

voke the guilty conscience of his foes, he creates a virtual self, embedding his deepest thoughts and desires. This virtual version of Hamlet is neither a one hundred per cent replication of Hamlet, but co-exists with him. Furthermore, virtual selves are also generated by the supporting actors accompanying “Hamlet” on stage. That is, not only are they players within Shakespeare’s Hamlet, but they are players forging new identities within Hamlet’s play. In essence, these virtual selves can co-exist with multitudes of replications and the aim is expansion (if immortality is to be successfully realised).

In regard to posthumanist discourse and theory and acknowledging that it is difficult to define a “posthuman,” the posthuman condition, let alone posthumanism, at the very least, some conceptualisation should be offered for continuity in this paper’s discussions. Thus, due to the lack of any fixed notion of posthumanism, in their introduction to *Posthuman Bodies* (1995), Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston make several claims regarding the central characteristics of virtual selves. For one, they argue that posthuman bodies “are the causes and effects of postmodern relations of power and pleasure, virtuality and reality” (p.3); and secondly, they add that such bodies “do not belong to linear history. They are of the past and future lived as a present crisis” (p.4). Significantly though, Halberstam and Livingston challenge notions of singularity as well as duality and hybridity by emphasising that there is not a posthuman body, but “bodies.” Hence, much emphasis is placed on “some” as a quantifier both numerable and innumerable but what is key here, is that the “multiple *must be made*” (pp.8-9). This necessity to replicate, for Halberstam and Livingston, is crucial in times of crises (p.9). Crises, in most manifestations, more or less involve identity or existential crises— thereby triggering fear of abandonment, loss, death or extinction. This too, I suggest, is the catalyst for self-preservation/-propagation. Self-propagation occurs when virtual selves are generated via mediated performative acts in a non-formulaic fashion. These virtually generated identities are dispersed among different realities and are born through either new media (such as SNS) or methods of narrative presentation. Furthermore, they are born for and exist for the blissful promise of immortality and the possibility of ever-presence. The central argument Halberstam and Living-

ston make assumes that technologies “permeate and mediate our relations to the ‘real’: the real is literally unimaginable or only imaginable within a technological society” (p.16). If we accept this claim, then we can see how virtual selves and MEdiated performative acts can be realised through IT and/or narrative-enabled methods of self-propagation. In this paper, I therefore argue that posthumanist discourse allows for the theorizing the possibility of virtual selves (identities) both in an early modern context (demonstrated by Shakespeare and his respective literature) and in a postmodern context (demonstrated by the current culture of techno-gluttony via the exponential expansion of interface identities). To elaborate, firstly, posthumanism embraces technology (especially new media) and techniques (methods of narrative presentation for self-propagation); secondly, it embraces the multiplicity and fluidity of identity; and lastly, it celebrates Derrida’s *différance*, or rather *différences*. For these fundamental reasons, posthumanist discourse and theoretical approaches provide a suitable framework for the greater understanding of virtual selves appearing both in Shakespeare’s works and in current interface technology usage.

Accounting for the need to propagate/preserve through “performative” acts

In his 1985 essay, ‘The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media,’ Jean Baudrillard comments on the effects of the mass media in a postmodern context, boldly suggesting that:

Each individual is forced despite himself into the undivided coherency of statistics. There is in this a positive absorption into the transparency of computers [...] this sort of continual voyeurism of the group [...] must at all times know what it wants, know what it thinks, be told about its least needs [...] constantly watch its own temperature chart, in a hypochondriacal madness. The social becomes obsessed with itself; through this auto-information, this permanent auto-intoxification (p.580).

Now, already over a decade into the twenty-first century, it would not be far-fetched to further contend that Baudrillard's argument still stands. Furthermore, the same argument can arguably account for similar cultural phenomena in both modern and pre-modern contexts. Take for example, Greek mythology. In particular, the myth of Narcissus in which the handsome, young son of a river god grew infatuated with his own reflection and drowned as a result. Since Narcissus' self-obsession led to his demise, was Canon's *Narcissus* a didactic warning of a condition exemplary of such auto-intoxication? Did Shakespeare too not project images of himself into his work and arguably suffer existential crises? Furthermore, did these existential crises, in turn, impel Shakespeare to fixate on the fanciful idea of self-preservation or propagation?

Whether it was a fixation or merely frequent contemplation, I argue that Shakespeare's recurring motif and arguably, longing for immortality (or a multi-faceted existence beyond corporeality) can be traced in a number of works. Sonnet 18 perhaps epitomises the motif best:

Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

Granted, defying space, time and mortality has been a human preoccupation prior to Shakespeare's articulation of such desires, but if one takes into account Richard Dawkins's *Selfish Genes* (1976) theory, it could be argued that Shakespeare's acknowledgment and reproduction of this withstanding cultural obsession is a means of survival for that particular ideal of immortality. Moreover, it can be suggested that immortality or self-preservation/-propagation is symptomatic of humanity's self-absorbed or selfish nature. Susan J. Blackmore, who extends the Dawkins's *Selfish Genes* theory, notes that the term *meme* is analogous to the term *gene*, and that "Memes do not have precise copying machinery as DNA has. They are still evolving their copying machines and this is what technology is for" (2000, p.204). If we take into account this claim as well as Baudrillard's criticism and Dawkins's

accounts for a self-replicating culture of self-absorption, all such arguments demonstrate that Shakespeare employed literature as means of self-propagation and that auto-intoxicated cyber citizens in a postmodern context too, appropriate the web and new media for the same purpose. However, how is this self-propagation or replication (according to Dawkins) achieved? Dawkins explains that replication is the basis for the memetic life cycle, leading to the spread of memes to more and more individuals. He adds that for successful replication, “Replicators of high longevity would therefore tend to become more numerous [...] another property of a replicator variety that must have had even more importance in spreading it through the population was [...] fecundity” (1989, p.17). Simply put, memetic survival rests upon its longevity, fecundity and therefore, duration in memory. To ensure memetic retention, repeated replication is, needless to say, crucial.

The question now remains, is how does Blackmore’s extended concept of memes and Law’s adaptation of the actor-network-theory (to be outlined later) relate to Shakespeare’s recurring motif of immortality and notions of ever-present posthuman figures who dwell neither in the past, nor in the future and are neither dead, nor alive? If we accept the previously outlined claims made by Baudrillard, Blackmore, Dawkins and Law, it can be suggested that Shakespeare simultaneously immortalised himself through the publication and performance of his works and ensured the memetic replication (of privileging immortality or mediated forms of existence) within the content and form of his texts. As suggested in the introduction, the pertinent methods of narrative presentation Shakespeare appropriated to reflect and replicate this memetic data are: *mise en abyme*, the often recycled “messenger” persona, soliloquies, and epilogues—all of which are performative acts.

In a contemporary context, however, I have noted that methods of self-replication are largely enabled by IT. To elaborate, let us first accept that in order to replicate the particular meme (concerning the value Western culture places on immortality of self-preservation) as well as one’s identity in a culture of highly evolved narcissism, new media and methods of narrative presentation are necessary tools for MEdiated performative acts of self-preservation. These acts thereby result in what can be referred to as “virtual

selves,” as opposed to “self.” Note that “selves” as opposed to “self” should be emphasised here given that both postmodern and posthuman discourse and theory tend to privilege plurality, multiplicity and fluidity in regard to identity. If one considers virtual selves in the contemporary context of widespread SNS usage, P2P (peer-to-peer) networking, increased connectivity through the inundation of human interface devices (HID) on the consumer market, such performative acts of self-preservation/-propagation via new media and methods of narrative presentation can be observed in online blogs, live chats, audio-visual broadcasts in real-time, decentred multi-player gaming in real-time and so forth. All of these are instantaneous performative acts which allow one of many or many different virtual selves to be temporarily locked in the present, possibly telepresent and anticipating the next chance or platform to be seen, heard or read, stored as data—immortalised. These self-propagative performative acts are fuelled by auto-intoxication, causing Homer/s, Shakespeare/s, Joyce/s and every other possible variation ad infinitum to rest assured in their secured timelessness in a pure Hayles-esque fashion which insists that the posthuman view “privileges informational pattern over material instantiation” (2010, p.2).

Methods of propagation: How the acts are performed

Having attempted to sketch some ideas, rather than providing a fixed definition of virtual selves and provide respective accounts for such a transient cultural phenomenon, it is now integral to consider the media and methods of self-preservation/-propagation (what I label as “MEdiated performative acts”) and to illustrate how these MEdiated performative acts are employed by Shakespeare and in the larger contemporary context of techno-gluttony.

Although Dawkins’s meme replication suffices as a basic explanation of cultural and self-propagation, John Law’s perspective of the actor-network-theory (1992) adds more depth to Dawkins’s replication process. To elaborate, Dawkins’s theory seems to lead one to believe that cultural phenomena simply float around and replicate without an intervening tool, agent, or more apt to this discussion, a medium. Law, however, claims that “think-

ing, acting, writing, loving, earning—all the attributes that we normally ascribe to human beings, are generated in networks that pass through and ramify both within and beyond the body [...] an actor is also always a network [...] a machine is a set of roles played by technical materials [...] all of these are networks which participate in the social” (1992, p.382). Succinctly put, if the cultural MEme which privileges self-preservation is to proliferate, an actor (a material or medium) is essential to store the data and transmit it. Would *Hamlet* have been preserved in the canon if there had not been a stage or materials with which to write? Would Bill Gates or Steve Jobs have been able to maintain their iconicity without the physical storage of their contributions to IT and HID industries? Given Law’s argument, it is thus reasonable to concede that some form of material matter is necessary to replicate cultural phenomena and in respect to virtual selves, these material forms are media. Given that Shakespeare’s primary medium was the stage as well as the respective publication of those plays, the actor-network-theory reinforces that media are imperative. Having said that, Law’s theory fails to consider the methods of transmission (in the case of fiction—narrative presentation).

Why theatre serves as one of Shakespeare’s ideal media for his particular performative acts of self-preservation rests upon several characteristics of theatre, but Jaques in *As You Like It* seems to articulate the power of theatre in the following excerpt:

All the world’s a stage
 And all the men and women merely players:
 They have their exits and their entrances;
 And one man in his time plays many parts,
 His acts being seven ages (2.7.138-142).

However, theatre or the staging of plays, as Friedrich Schiller notes, “reconciles the two opposed impulses that constitute humanity: the sense impulse (which responds to the outside world) and the form impulse (which imposes self on the outside world)” (1989, p.77). Given this characteristic of theatre, Shakespeare could impose himself through actors on stage and in a sense,

this was one of his means of self-propagation. In regard to performativity, cultural theorist Jon McKenzie, suggests that performative subjects are fragmented, decentred, virtual, actual, unstable and simulated (2001, p.18). These characteristics further reinforce the posthuman conditions apparent in the performers of Shakespeare's plays and also in patterns of HID usage (where a user propagates, becoming manifold *users* in a decentred and simulated environment). In terms of presentism as a particular posthuman condition, a performance occurs in real-time and may also be repeated in the future and recalled as a past event. Derrida's comments on presentism and theatre presuppose that Western culture's "deep striving for present-ness to self makes the stage its most authentic apparatus [...] theatre entails first the end of Western metaphysics itself" (1978, pp. 245-50). Perhaps reflecting this deep striving for present-ness and the nature of posthuman conditions in which identities become fragmented, unstable and simulated, Shakespeare demonstrated that theatre, as a medium, sets the stage for self-propagation. However, as noted, it is also in the methods of staging (the presentation of narrative) that the self-propagation is facilitated. Therefore, in the forthcoming analyses of Shakespeare's manipulation of methods of narrative presentation (*mise en abyme*, the "messenger" persona, soliloquies, and epilogues) I will demonstrate how they also reflect performative acts of self-propagation in contemporary HID usage.

Analyses of form and content to locate the virtual selves: virtual selves via *mise en abyme*: Playing and playing games

The first and most conspicuous method of narrative presentation which supports performative acts of self-preservation is *mise en abyme*—quite simply, a play within a play. Mary Flanagan's theory on gaming specifies that the user causes the character to act; the character acts independently—with some autonomy and some agency; users act with the characters as friends; and that players identify themselves with the characters (2002, p.431). In this sense, both *mise en abyme* and online gaming are analogous. Both are conducted in real-time, simulated, immersive and allow for free

play. Therefore, let us assume that playing not only bears relevance to Shakespeare's plays and the freedom of the performers to make subtle alterations (by playing with the original), but also to current online multi-player role-playing games (RPGs). To put into perspective, in *Virtual Worlds* (2004), cultural theorist, Prahmod K. Nayar claims that such games "give the player the illusion of existing in an alternative world [...] even though mobility and freedom is limited, the partial freedom gives the illusion of involvement" (p.130).

In addition, although both plays and RPGs "end," they may also be re-played infinitely, with each replay differentiating from another. These characteristics quite blatantly convey and propagate the desirability of immortality, the fragmented, decentred and unstable virtual selves—the transient figures which are still temporally fixed in the present. Consider Hamlet both as a player within Shakespeare's play and as moderator of his own game/play. The player (the one performing Hamlet's persona) and the players (performing as personae within Hamlet's play on an intra-narrative level), have a fixed set of lines and stage directions, but it is through the delivery of lines (the complexity of intonation and pitch) and the variability of gestures, that they may generate new virtual selves in each new performance. In this fashion, self-propagation is facilitated, successful and the virtual selves are thus temporarily acknowledged. This is more or less epitomised with the following remarks by Hamlet: "[...] will you see the players well bestow'd? Do you hear, let them be well us'd; for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time [...]" (2.2. 553-556). This particular excerpt reflects the temporal instability of the players (as virtual selves), fragmented as "abstracts" yet they should be well bestowed. This request somewhat signifies the value Hamlet places on these virtual selves as if they were akin to him. Furthermore, the blurring between the real and the simulated are also articulated by Hamlet despite the remarks about the fictitious nature of performative acts in the following excerpt:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,

But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? (2.2. 585-591)

Here in particular, Hamlet draws attention to the action of the player's body in accord with his imagination—again, blurring the boundaries between the simulated and the real but nonetheless acknowledging its existence.

Another significant factor in terms of *mise en abyme* and gaming which reflects the value of self-preservation is the aim to win. As opposed to losing, one must immerse oneself fully into the simulation and avoid or cheat death. This, for example, is demonstrated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Bottom warns: "if you should fright the ladies out of their wits, here they would have no more discretion but to hang us" (1.2. 82-84). Thus, despite being moderated by requirements of the play, the players exert some freedom in the performance by toning down the lion's ferocity so as to avoid frightening the audience and thereby, winning "the game" by avoiding death. The later omission of the epilogue as requested by Theseus connotes the negative attitudes towards death, serving as a warning and placing emphasis on self-preservation. The self-reflexivity inherent in the *mise en abyme* scenario and the power of the intra-narrative players to exercise control in the play, potentially reflects the crossing of boundaries between fiction and reality, simulated and actual, and fixed and free mobility and speech. Having insofar evidenced on both a meta-narrative and intra-narrative level, playing and game play as simulated environments parallel the posthuman experience outlined thus far.

Analyses of form and content to locate the virtual selves: Shakespeare's use of the "the messenger" as a means of self-propagation

In a Web 2.0 context, "messenger" might allude to Microsoft's early P2P

instant messaging service. However, for Shakespeare, the messenger, the herald, and several other civilian personae, bear the burden of delivering news to the central protagonists. Consider the following excerpt from *Macbeth*:

Macbeth:

Thou comest to use thy tongue; thy story
quickly.

Messenger:

Gracious my lord,
I should report that which I say I saw.
But know not how to do it (5.5. 28-32).

This particular messenger then details his witnessing of the moving of wood to which Macbeth replies, “Liar and slave!” and “If thou speak’st false upon the next tree shalt thou hang” (5.5. 34-40).

Given that timeliness, reliability and veracity are emphasised here and often requested by the senders and recipients of information, it can easily be considered semantically analogous to the mass media. However, more personalised and customised news or information subscriptions such as RDF Site Summary (RSS) feeds and the expansion of the online application, Twitter, more aptly reflect and reproduce the timelessness and state of being “out of time” of Shakespeare’s messenger persona. To elaborate, Twitter is an application likened to an online short message system (SMS) service. It is both utilised as an instantaneous and brief social network service and exploited by media organisations and corporations to dispatch information to a wider community of recipients. Brevity, speed and digestibility are its selling points. However, the expansion of social media users and reputable media sources raises issues of reliability and veracity. Due to this condition, it more suitably reflects the personally appointed messengers in Shakespeare’s works such as Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. According to Harold Bloom, Puck exhibits all the traits of a typical trickster, including deception, swift movement, voice alteration and cleverness (Bloom, 2010,

p.116). In this sense, because Puck's messages are swift but lack veracity, we can liken him/her to gossip-spreading forms of social media such as Twitter.

RSS feeds, in comparison, are often preferred by reputable media sources and those requiring such services for similar brief and instantaneous snippets of potentially life-changing information. The constant digestible updates (the feeds), renders RSS both a source of information and energy. It exists, it is embodied, digested, regurgitated and then replicated. It is the medium, the message, the message and the invincible epitome of the immortal virtual self since as Pierre Lévy reminds us, "The digital is implicit in its visible manifestation, it is neither unreal nor immaterial, but virtual. This is the virtualisation waiting to be actualised, materialised" (2001, p.36). Once transmitted and processed/read, it is reproduced and anticipates its multiple reproductions.

Virtual selves via a soliloquy: Playing with words

In contrast to inter-personae dialogue, the soliloquy somewhat resembles an articulated interior monologue addressed to an exclusive audience, a collective sympathetic ear. In respect to HID usage, SMS usage, emails, P2P communication and anonymous posts on social networks are analogous to the intimate communication of thoughts of a stage persona (as a virtual self) to an audience. The significant contrast to direct inter-personae dialogue is the ability to collect one's thoughts and censor one's expressions without the fear attached to the dangers of disclosing harmful information due to poor diction. In such environments, one may repress, digress, misinform and fabricate realities for one's own means. The main motivation is to constantly draw attention to oneself.

In regard to these virtual identities, Howard Rheingold further outlines that we "reduce and encode our identities as words on a screen [...] the stories (true and false), we tell about ourselves (or about the identity we want people to believe us to be) is what determines our identity in cyberspace (1992, p.61). Whilst creativity in identity construction/self-propaga-

tion is enabled here, it must also be stressed that virtual selves are not wholly fabricated identities and the variation of selves being replicated is central to successful performative acts of self-propagation (if immortality is to be realised). Whilst Jaques' formerly cited soliloquy indicates the plurality of virtual selves or performative figures, Hamlet's (the supposed madman) intimate address to the audience reflects the above-mentioned trends in P2P communication:

To die, to sleep –
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to [...] (3.1.60-63).

Here Hamlet intimately discloses his death wish and inner turmoil. The constant repetition and overly drawn out nature of the soliloquy arguably resembles prima donna-like ramblings apparent in such auto-intoxicated posts found on social networks. It is an invocation, to draw attention, the need to be heard, read, seen, and to be acknowledged. However, rather than outwardly proclaiming such, a self-censored and biased intimate articulation satisfies the need for successful self-preservation and the more repetitious or prolific one is, the more one proliferates one's virtual selves.

Virtual selves via an epi(b)logue: The unending ends

As previously illustrated, the epilogue serves as a warning or at least privileges life or immortality over death. The absence or deliberate omission of an epilogue somewhat connotes the immortality of a narrative as well as virtual selves. Since there is no end, just new beginnings, an epilogue resembles the structure and usage of social network services. To be more specific, consider how blogging operates. Nayar regards a blog as a "website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order" (p.193). Given that the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end, combined with the perpetual postings and updates, and the desperate need to reiterate the past in the present, one may infer that there is

no “end”—there are only new beginnings of new narratives (or the same narratives reconstructed). Thus the immortal facet of the blogged virtual self not only celebrates immortality, but again, reconfirms the negative connotations of death and hence, the reason to self-propagate.

As an epilogue exemplary of such a perpetual existence is Prospero’s temporal suspension in time, in a state of banishment (as opposed to death) in *The Tempest*. He quotes:

I must be here, confin’d by you, [...]
In this bare island [...],
But release me from my bands [...]
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be reliev’d by prayer, [...]
As you from crimes would pardon’d be,
Let your indulgence set me free (5.1. 4-20).

Here Prospero invokes sympathy after being banished and employs the epilogue as a means of communication to those beyond his plane of existence. Completely isolated, the only way Prospero (or virtual selves) can maintain their immortality and prosper, so to speak, is to be actualised—that is, through sensual perception and cognitive processing. If acknowledging Marie-Laure Ryan’s argument that the act of writing actualises ideas, thoughts and memories and moreover, that “every act of reading actualises the text” (1999, p.92), it can be inferred that the former claims which parallel blogging trends with epilogues, bear some relevance to both early modern and Web 2.0 contexts. However, Web 2.0 is not the end of virtual potential and if “end” in Web 2.0 requires deletion of data, more often than not, copies or replications have already been made and are circulating. Hence, the “end” is rendered a slower and more difficult process—making notions of immortality and the posthuman condition even more relevant today than they were five centuries ago.

Conclusion/s

Craven Moore To be or not to be...

13 minutes ago · Like

Ant Chan It is still the question, but other questions remain unanswered.

11 minutes ago · Like

Craven Moore For example?

8 minutes ago · Like

Ant Chan If I understand correctly, by blending cultural evolutionary theory with posthumanist discourse to approach Shakespeare and HID usage, you have attempted to illustrate that early modern and contemporary culture exhibit(ed) some kind of auto-intoxication, triggering a fear of death or yearning for immortality. This, in turn, impels one to self-propagate through new media and/or methods of narrative presentation in traditional media. These acts of self-propagation then generate virtual selves, which are only actualised when observed/read/consumed by a third party. If that stands correct, then if one considers Ovid's or the disciples' analogue preservation of their work also symptomatic of this auto-intoxicated condition, then can one assume that humans were always posthuman? Were humans ever human?

8 minutes ago · Like

Antonija 2.0 To respond to the latter question, taxonomically—yes. Whether it is a fear of death or quest for immortality, this insecurity is a catalyst for the need to replicate or leave one's mark, so to speak. While some humans perform the replication by physiological means, others appropriate, develop or adopt tools and techniques (virtual selves require media and/or methods of narrative presentation). Furthermore, some humans combine both strategies for replication such as Mary Shelley or Bill Gates. Therefore, a taxonomically classified human can be both human and posthuman (as a virtual self or selves). Self-preservation has a greater chance of success if both strategies are adopted.

4 minutes ago · Like

Antonija 1.0 Logically speaking, two survival strategies might increase one's chances of survival, but regarding the logic of dualism and counter-logic, how can one exhibit both posthuman and human characteristics simultaneously?

3 minutes ago · Like

Antonija 2.0 A reasonable counter-argument but remember—posthumanist discourse embraces counter-logic and furthermore, virtual selves exist virtually, but are only actualised upon sensual perception and cognitive processing. However, these virtual selves cannot be generated without the application of tools/technologies with which one may materially record data— no papyrus = no hieroglyphics; no diary = no Anne Frank, no registered trademark procedures = no Macintosh for Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. The exponential development and usage of HIDs has now facilitated the proliferation of virtual selves insofar any individual with access and skills to operate a particular HID can replicate within minutes.

2 minutes ago · Like

Antonija 1.0 I see. By the way, I have one more question...How is Shakespeare related to any of this?

about a minute ago · Like

Antonija 2.0 Have you not read the full paper? Well, as noted, reiterating the past is indeed a strategy to draw attention to oneself, but if brevity is the trend, then this discussion should be closed. Shakespeare left us with this, this (Face)book, and this gives life to thee.

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